

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A 8NEW YORK TIMES
3 January 1986

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Awry Test Missile Taken Mostly in Stride in Florida Area Tied to Military

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Special to The New York Times

FORT WALTON BEACH, Fla. — When the Pentagon disclosed plans for a series of test flights of unarmed Tomahawk cruise missiles over the Florida Panhandle and southern Alabama, it said the odds against a malfunctioning missile's raising death and destruction on the populace below were a quadrillion to one.

So it was with a measure of discomfort that the public learned that in the very first of 40 or more tests planned, a Tomahawk went astray.

Passing over the coast at subsonic speeds after it was launched Dec. 8 from a nuclear submarine in the Gulf of Mexico, the missile veered miles off course. Chase planes aborted the missile's flight by activating a parachute.

The 18.2-foot-long Tomahawk fell into the woods near Freeport on the eastern edge of Choctawhatchee Bay.

'It Would've Hit My House'

A Pentagon spokesman described the crash site as unpopulated, a description that brought jeers from those living there.

"If that thing had been an eyelash off, it would've hit my house," Regina Burgener told reporters at the time. She said the Pentagon's contention that the aborted test flight posed no threat to human life was "an out-and-out lie — there are houses up here."

Most residents in the semirural part of Walton County, however, appeared to take the episode in stride. Eglin Air Force Base, where the missile was supposed to land after a low-level flight, is a major force in the local economy and on public opinion.

The base's 42,000 military and civil service employees and dependents and the 23,000 military retirees who have settled in the area receive \$600 million in Government checks annually. The economic impact on the Panhandle is placed at just under \$1 billion a year.

A Most Patriotic City

Fort Walton Beach, just outside Eglin's main gate, bills itself as America's Most Patriotic City. "This area is accustomed to being involved in tests of all kinds of weapon systems," says Mayor John Shortall Jr. "Guidance malfunctions can happen, but the missile has built-in safety features that eliminate a public safety problem."

The Mayor, a retired Air Force colonel who moved here in 1966 from upstate New York to work for a civilian electronics concern, said local people were more concerned that the Government would withhold a cost-of-living adjustment on New Year's Day than that a test flight had had "a hiccup."

But other people, like Renee Williams, a Fort Walton Beach resident who has been something of a one-woman peace crusade locally, saw the

mishap as forcing even those who depend on the military for a living to reconsider the dangers involved in the 40 or more tests planned in their skies for the rest of the decade. About 125,000 people live within a 20-minute drive of Eglin's main gates.

"It caused the first awakening of a lot of people who thought the military could do no wrong," Mrs. Williams said in an interview, adding that a lot of local residents had been calling her to express concern about the missile failure.

"I don't think they are really concerned about the cruise missile and its deployment as much as they're worried about it falling on their heads," said Mrs. Williams, a 41-year-old native of Nazareth, Pa. But, she said, "what we want to get across is the threat to personal safety this weapon and its deployment will bring to the rest of the world."

Like just about everyone else in this section of the Panhandle, which also includes Tyndall Air Force Base and Pensacola Naval Air Station, Mrs. Williams has ties to the military. Her husband is a colonel who works on radar guidance systems at Eglin.

Eglin, with 725 square miles of property, two-thirds the size of Rhode Island, is the largest non-Communist military base in the world. Its size and remoteness have made it ideal for training secret missions.

The community therefore seemed unperturbed by the announcement that the first tests of the weapon in the East would be conducted here. Previous tests were in California and Nevada, on flight paths that were mostly over deserts and uninhabited plains and mountains.

The news of the tests did bring an outcry from the Florida Coalition for Peace and Justice, whose 39 member groups for the most part support a freeze on the deployment of new nuclear weapons. Coalition groups sent about 75 members to Fort Walton Beach in October. Predictably, the demonstration drew little local support outside of Mrs. Williams and some friends from the local Unitarian Church.

Mayor Shortall, among others, says the peace groups are misguided, arguing that the successful aborting of the missile flight demonstrates the safety of the tests.

But Bruce Gagnon, the Orlando-based coordinator of the peace coalition, said he hoped more local people would join its members when they return in 1986 to try to snare a cruise missile in flight. The protesters, he says, will loft a 100-foot-long fish net tethered to weather balloons in the path of an incoming Tomahawk, an act that he admits may be more symbolic than workable.